

56 Modal verbs

Modal verbs are very common in English. They are used to talk about a variety of things, particularly possibilities, obligations, and deductions.

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56.1 USES OF MODAL VERBS

English has many modal verbs. Each modal verb can be used in several different contexts.

ABILITY

I **can** speak three languages.
I **can't** read Latin because it's too difficult.
I **couldn't** study it when I was at school.



PERMISSION

You **can** have more cake if you want.
You **may** take as much as you like.
Could I have another slice of cake?



REQUESTS

Can / **Could** you give me a ride home later?
Would you email James for me, please?
Will you lock up the office tonight?



OFFERS

Can I help you with those?
May I take one of those for you?
Shall I carry some of your bags?



SUGGESTIONS AND ADVICE

You **should** / **ought to** go to the doctor.
You **could** try the new medicine.



OBLIGATION

You **must** arrive on time for work.
You **must not** be late for work.



LOGICAL DEDUCTIONS

It **can't** be Jane because she's on vacation.
It **could** / **might** / **may** be Dave. I don't know.
It **must** be Tom, since nobody else ever calls.



56.2 MODAL VERB FORMATIONS

Modal verbs share certain characteristics. They don't change form to match the subject, and they are always followed by a main verb in its base form. Their question and negative forms are made without "do."

SUBJECT	MODAL VERB	BASE FORM	REST OF SENTENCE
I / You / He / She / It / We / They	can	play	the piano quite well.

The modal verb stays the same for any subject.

The main verb stays in its base form.

Negatives are formed by adding "not" between the modal verb and main verb.

You **should** run a marathon.



You **should not** run a marathon.



Questions are usually formed by swapping the subject and the modal verb.

They **should** visit the castle.



Should they visit the castle?



"Ought to" and "have to" are exceptions because they use "to" before the base form. "Ought to" is a more formal way of saying "should," and "have to" means "must." They both act like normal verbs.

You **{ ought to / have to }** learn how to drive.



57 Ability

"Can" is a modal verb that describes what someone is able to do. It is used in different forms to describe past and present abilities.

See also:

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57.1 "CAN / CANNOT / CAN'T"

"Can" goes between the subject and the main verb.
The verb after "can" goes in its base form.

I **can** ride a bicycle.

"Can" is always the same. It doesn't change with the subject.



He **can** play the guitar.

Base form of verb.



The negative form of "can" is "cannot" or "can't."

I { **cannot** / **can't** } sing jazz songs.

The more common, short form of "cannot."



TIP

The long negative form "cannot" is always spelled as one word, not two words.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Janet **can** play tennis.



He **cannot** climb the tree.



Bob **can** swim well.



They **can't** lift the box.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

I / You / He / She
It / We / They

"CAN / CANNOT / CAN'T"

can
cannot
can't

BASE FORM

ride

OBJECT

a bicycle.

57.2 "COULD" FOR PAST ABILITIES

"Could" is the past form of "can" and is used to talk about an ability in the past. "When" plus a time setting can be used to say when someone had the ability.



The time frame can be set with a phrase about an age, day, or year.

I can't climb trees now, but **I could** when I was younger.

Describes a present ability.

Describes a past ability.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

When I was a student, **I could** study all night before an exam.



When Milo was eight, **he could** play the violin.



Negative form.

I couldn't go to China last year because it was too expensive.



Last year **she couldn't** run very far, but yesterday she ran a marathon.



57.3 "CAN" IN THE FUTURE

It is not grammatically possible to talk about the future using "can." "Will be able to" is used instead.

At the moment, **I can** play the trombone quite well.



If I work harder, **I will be able to** play at concerts.

"Will can" is incorrect.

The negative is formed with "not able to" or "unable to."

Unfortunately, **I can't** read music very well.



If I don't learn, **{ I won't be able to / will be unable to }** join the orchestra.

"Will be unable to" can also be used, but it's less common.

58 Permission, requests, and offers

"Can," "could," and "may" are used to ask permission to do something, or to ask someone to do something for you. They can also be used to offer to help someone.

See also:

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58.1 ASKING PERMISSION AND MAKING REQUESTS

"Can" is the most common modal verb used to ask permission or to make a request.

Can I have some popcorn?



Yes, you can.

Informal answers use "can" as well.

"Could" replaces "can" for more formal situations, such as in business or to talk to strangers.

Excuse me, could I sit here, please?



I'm sorry, but that seat is taken.

Negative answers can be more polite by adding "I'm sorry" or "I'm afraid."

"Please" is used in polite requests.

"May" can also be used in formal situations.

May I make an appointment?



Of course.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Can I borrow your pen?



Excuse me, could you open the door for me?



Can I have this in a smaller size?



May I reserve a table for 7pm?



58.2 MAKING OFFERS

"Can" and "may" can also be used to offer to do something for someone.

Can I help you carry those?

Yes, please.



"May" is only used for formal situations.

May I take your coat?

Yes, thank you.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

Can I get you a drink?

That would be lovely.



My computer's broken again!

Can I help at all?



Good evening.
May I take your order?

Yes, please.



Which way is the elevator?

It's on the left.
May I help you with your bags?



58.3 SHALL FOR OFFERS AND SUGGESTIONS

"Shall" is used to find out if someone thinks a certain suggestion is a good idea. This is not often used in US English.

That bag looks heavy. Shall I carry it for you?

Yes, please.



Shall I open the window?

Good idea. it's far too hot in here.



59 Suggestions and advice

The modal verb “could” can be used to offer suggestions. “Could” is not as strong as “should.” It communicates gentle advice.

See also:

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59.1 “SHOULD” FOR ADVICE

“Should” is used when the speaker wants to make a strong suggestion.

It’s very sunny. You **should** wear a hat.

“Should” comes before the advice.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

It might rain. You **should** take your umbrella with you.



You’re sick. I don’t think you **should** go to work today.



There’s ice on the roads. You **shouldn’t** drive tonight.



Which hat **should** I buy? They’re all so cool.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

You

“SHOULD”

should

MAIN VERB

wear

REST OF SENTENCE

a hat.

“Should” is a modal verb, so it stays the same no matter what the subject is.

“Should” is followed by the base form of the main verb.

59.2 "OUGHT TO" FOR ADVICE

"Ought to" is a more formal and less common way to say "should."
It is not usually used in the negative or question forms.



You { **should**
ought to } wear a scarf. It's very cold outside.

59.3 "IF I WERE YOU"

English uses "if I were you" to give advice in second conditional sentences. The advice is expressed using "I would."

I don't know if I should take this job.



If I **were** you, I would take it.

English uses "were," not "was," in this context.

The advice comes after "I would."

FURTHER EXAMPLES

I'm going to the concert tonight.



If I **were** you, I'd leave early. The traffic is awful.

The suggestion can come first without changing the meaning.

I think I'll buy this shirt.



I wouldn't buy it if I **were** you. I don't like the pattern.

There is no comma before "if."

59.4 "HAD BETTER"

"Had better" can also be used to give very strong or urgent advice that can have a negative consequence if it is not followed.



{ **You had better**
You'd better } leave for school! It's already 8.45.

59.5 "COULD" FOR SUGGESTIONS

"Could" is often used to suggest a solution to a problem. It states a possible course of action without necessarily recommending it.

"Could" means that the action is a possibility; a choice that might solve the problem.

I hate my car!



Well, you **could** get a new one!



FURTHER EXAMPLES

You **could** study science in college.



We **could** learn English in Canada next year.



If they need more space, they **could** buy a bigger house.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

You

"COULD"

could

MAIN VERB

get

REST OF SENTENCE

a new car.

"Could" is a modal verb, so it doesn't change with the subject.

The main verb stays in its base form.

59.6 "COULD" AND "OR" FOR SUGGESTIONS

When people give suggestions using "could," they often give more than one option to choose from.



Our friends are coming over for dinner, but the oven's broken.



We could make a salad or we could order a pizza.

"Or" is used to give an alternative suggestion.

FURTHER EXAMPLES



I can't decide what to make for dinner tonight.

Well, you could make a curry or lasagne.

The modal verb doesn't have to be repeated after "or."



What should I wear to Jan's wedding?

You could wear your new dress or a skirt.

If the main verb is the same for both suggestions, it isn't repeated after "or."

59.7 MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the most common ways of recommending something or making a suggestion is to use modal verbs.



You {could
might} visit the park. It's beautiful.

General suggestion.



You {should
ought to} visit the castle. It's great.

Stronger suggestion.



You must visit the palace. It is beautiful!

Very strong suggestion.

TIP

Emphasis can be added by putting "really" in front of "should," "ought to," and "must."

60 Obligations

In English, "have to" or "must" are used when talking about obligations or things that are necessary. They are often used to give important instructions.

See also:

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60.1 OBLIGATIONS

"Must" and "have to" both express a strong need or obligation to do something.



You **must** / **have to** rest, or your leg won't heal.

"Must not" is a strong negative obligation. It means something is not allowed.



You **must not** get your bandage wet, or your leg might not heal properly.

"Don't have to" means something is not necessary, or there is no obligation.



You **don't have to** come again. Your leg is better.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

He **must** take two pills each morning and evening for the next two weeks.



She **must not** go back to work until her back is better.



Do I have to go back to the doctor again? I'm feeling so much better now.



HOW TO FORM

"Must" does not change with the subject, but "have to" becomes "has to" in the third person singular. Both forms are followed by the base form of the main verb.

SUBJECT	"MUST / HAVE TO"	MAIN VERB	REST OF SENTENCE
She	must has to must not doesn't have to	take	this medicine.



COMMON MISTAKES "MUST NOT" AND "DON'T HAVE TO"

"Must not" and "don't have to" do not mean the same thing.

"Must not" is used to give an instruction that forbids someone from doing something. "Don't have to" is used to tell someone that it is not necessary that they do something.

You **must not** use a calculator during this exam.

[It is against the rules to use a calculator during this exam.]



You **don't have to** use a calculator, but it might be useful.

[You are allowed to use a calculator, but it is not required.]



60.2 "MUST" AND "HAVE TO" IN THE FUTURE

There is no future form of "must." The future of "have to" is formed with the auxiliary verb "will."

In some countries, people **{ must have to }** recycle. It's the law.



In the future, I think everyone **will have to** recycle.

↖ "Will must" is incorrect.

"Must not" does not have a future form. "Don't have to" can be used in the future by changing "don't" to "will not" or "won't."

One day, I hope I **will not have to** work so hard.



60.3 "MUST" AND "HAVE TO" IN THE PAST

There is no past form of "must." The past tense of "have to" is used instead.

For most jobs, you **{ must have to }** use a computer.

In the past, you **didn't have to** use a computer.



61 Making deductions

Modal verbs can also be used to talk about how likely or unlikely something is. They can be used to guess and make deductions about what has happened or is happening now.

See also:

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61.1 SPECULATION AND DEDUCTION

The modal verbs “might” and “could” are used to talk about something with uncertainty.

“Might” and “could” can be used to talk about uncertainty.

John has a sore ankle. It { might could } be broken.

The modal verb doesn't change with the subject.

The modal verb is usually followed by the base form of the main verb.



“Might not” is used to describe negative things that are not certain.

It's not very swollen, so it might not be serious.

“Not” goes after the modal verb.



“Must” is often used to speculate about the present.

John must be very bored at home. He's usually so active.



“Cannot” and “can't” are used when someone is certain something is impossible.

John's leg { cannot can't } be broken. He walked to the doctor.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

Fay's got a sore throat and isn't feeling well. She might have a cold.



I was so sick last week that I couldn't get out of bed.



My eyes are itchy and I have a runny nose. It could be hay fever.



I can't have the flu because I don't have a high temperature.



61.2 SPECULATION AND DEDUCTION ABOUT THE PAST

"**Must have**" with a past participle is used to speculate about the past when the speaker is sure something happened.

He just disappeared. Aliens **must have taken** him.

Past participle



"**Must**" can be replaced with "may," "might," or "could" when the speaker is not sure whether something happened or not.

They { **might**
may
could } **have taken** him to another planet.



"**Can't**" or "**couldn't**" can be used to refer to something that the speaker is certain did not happen.

It { **can't**
couldn't } **have been** aliens, they don't exist.



FURTHER EXAMPLES



Bethan didn't return my call yesterday. She **must have been** busy.



She **might have** forgotten to call me back.



She **might not have** written down my number correctly.



Paula **can't have** been at the party last night, she was at work.



I didn't see who knocked on the door, but it **may have** been the mailman.



What happened to my vase? The cat **must have** knocked it over.

62 Possibility

Modal verbs can be used to talk about possibility, or to express uncertainty. "Might" is the most common modal verb used for this purpose.

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62.1 "MIGHT" FOR POSSIBILITY

"Might" can be added to different phrases to refer to past, present, or future possibilities.

PAST POSSIBILITY

"MIGHT" + "HAVE" + PAST PARTICIPLE

I can't find the compass. I **might have dropped** it earlier.



PRESENT POSSIBILITY

"MIGHT" + BASE FORM

I don't remember this path. We **might be** lost.



FUTURE POSSIBILITY

"MIGHT" + "BASE FORM" + FUTURE TIME

It's very cold outside. It **might snow** later on.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

We **might have taken** a wrong turn at the river.



It **might be** windy at the top of the mountain.



"Not" always comes after
"might" to form the negative.

Joe **might not come** walking with us next weekend.



TIP

Questions with "might" are only used in very formal English.

62.2 "MIGHT" WITH UNCERTAINTY

Other phrases can be added to sentences with "might" to emphasize uncertainty about something.



I **might** take the bus home. I'm not sure.

I **don't know**. I **might** have more pizza.



62.3 PAST POSSIBILITY

As well as "might," other modal verbs can be used to talk about something that possibly happened in the past.



The copier isn't working. It **{ might
may
could }** have run out of paper.

[He thinks it is possible that the copier has run out of paper.]

These constructions can be used to talk about something that possibly did not happen in the past.



You **{ might not
may not }** have plugged it in correctly.

[He thinks it is possible that the printer wasn't plugged in correctly.]

"Could not" can only be used when the speaker is certain that something did not happen.



You **couldn't have** changed the ink correctly.

[He is certain that the ink wasn't changed correctly.]